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### Collective Political Action and Activism on Twitter: The Merits and Limitations of the Framing Tactics and Strategies of the 2018 National Prison Strike

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# Collective Political Action and Activism on Twitter: The Merits and Limitations of the Framing Tactics and Strategies of the 2018 National Prison Strike

## Abstract:

The success of any collective political action relies heavily on public opinion. The leaders of these actions use framing techniques to optimize the reach of their message and convince broader portions of the population to sympathize with their cause. Today, most political conversations and debates about pressing social issues takes on social media platforms such as Twitter, which could be conceptualized as a virtual public sphere, where different individuals meet and discuss political events and issues as equally empowered citizens and active members of society. However, in practice, some individuals remain unable to participate in these discourses and conversations.

Philip Wasserburg examines the case of the 2018 a riot at Lee Correctional Facility in South Carolina and the nationwide Prison Strike—the largest in the history of the United States—it triggered. Here, Wasserburg argues that due to legal restrictions on prisoner's right to freedom of speech, the voices and stories heard by the public on social media were restricted to those from a few Twitter accounts run by inmates, which were responsible for convincing a broadly punitively inclined public that injustices within the prison system do in fact exist. Through a critical analysis of the framing techniques of these social media accounts leading and organizing the Strike, a fuller picture emerges that reveals the limitations, successes, and shortfalls of this particular form of collective political action on Twitter.

**Keywords:** Collective Action; Framing; Public Sphere; Social Media; 2018 National Prison Strike; Freedom of Speech;

## The Punitive Turn in US Law and Culture

In the 1990s Americans-- at the polls and through legislation-- embraced rigid and extreme punitive policies, as exemplified in longer and tougher sentencing acts, such as the "Three Strikes and You're Out" rule, as well as in the increased use of life sentences and the death penalty, practices that most developed countries have abolished. But what has caused this punitive public attitude? A few theories have provided tentative answers to this complex phenomenon. Some argue that local news stories featuring violent crime affect people's attitudes. But while they found that people who watch such stories typically have greater levels of punitive sentiments than those who do not (Waid-Lindberg et al.), this is a correlation rather than a causation; it may be that people with punitive attitudes simply choose to watch more of this kind of programming.

Others theorize that public fear of a racialized 'other' leads to fear of a breakdown of social cohesion and that might be the cause of harsher punitive attitudes. Indeed, a 1997 randomized survey of 166 people in the Bay Area linked increasingly punitive attitudes with two factors-- lack of education and people's concerns about the "decline in morality and discipline within the family and increases in the diversity of society"(Tyler & Boeckmann 1997 ).

Racial Animus Theory, which posits that radical methods of social control are used when a dominant social group fears a racialized other. Research in this field has

shown that racial animus is present regardless of the proportion or even presence of minorities in a community (Chiricos 2004), and that perception of the criminality of other racial groups is linked with increased support of punitive policies (Chiricos 2014).

Therefore, what may be at play here is more of a feedback loop whereby people's racialized fears are enforced by watching news that privileges stories of violent crime, especially those carried out by people of color. This would help explain the disparity in sentencing between black and white offenders, as black offenders are sentenced, on average, to 19.1% more time than white offenders who are convicted of the same crime (USSC, 2017).

#### From the Punitive Public to Radical Protest Movements

The above studies and theories highlight the role that fear--fanned by the media-- plays in the public support of harsh punitive measures. Studies of the psychological processes of people who embrace more punitive policies highlight their use of 'affective' ways of thinking- thinking motivated by fear- whereas people who have a 'complex' way of thinking characterize problems of criminal justice and prisons not as morally black and white, but as complex phenomenon with nuanced answers. They focus their attention on concrete preventative policies around crime, such as improving economic conditions, remedial education for prisoners, job training in central cities, neighborhood watch programs, gun control legislation, and putting more police on patrol (Sotirovic 2001). In this context, the role of activists would seem to be to encourage a 'complex' way of thinking about prisons and punitive policies.

## Framing the Message

In order to convey their message to a broader public, protest movements engage in the process of framing, which is the way collective action organizations present reality, what they emphasize, their purpose, and who they are addressed to. The ways in which they do this is hugely important to their success in gaining support.

Collective action movements require a sense of consensus of opinion and an agreed-upon plan of action. These are created through diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and frame alignment. Diagnostic framing identifies the problem and who is to blame. It primarily utilizes the rhetoric of injustice, making claims regarding what constitutes the legitimate, identifying an antagonist, and attempting to sway the public by providing them with the political awareness needed to challenge things that violate norms of legitimacy (Ciurel 2018). It is important to note that methods here can inhibit the spread of a message, as identifying abstract and impersonal features inhibits mobilization.

Prognostic framing takes the next step by identifying possible solutions to the problem. These proposed changes can be diverse in nature and pragmatic or idealistic depending on the group. Prognostic framing employs the rhetoric of identity in an effort to form an oppositional collective that challenges the identified antagonist, the features of which have been defined in the diagnostic framing. Lastly, movements employ the rhetoric of agency to empower people to believe in the possibility of effecting change, and to provide a method through which to do so (Ciurel 8).

Once a prognostic frame (such as a list of demands) has been developed, groups must attract new members, media attention, and resources. This process is

called frame alignment, and consists of frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation.

Frame bridging is the process through which a movement aims to connect with another movement with a similar ideological outlook, or with a segment of the general public that might be sympathetic to its goals or situation. Frame amplification involves emphasizing one of the facets within the collective action frame in order to gain greater support. Alternatively, movements may attempt to play off of existing norms, allying themselves with other groups with overlapping goals or core beliefs.

Frame extension is the attempted expansion of a frame in order to include people whose frame isn't in direct opposition to them, yet is not exactly in direct accordance to the collective action frame of the social movement. Lastly, frame transformation is a long-term effort that aims to change the underlying norm, cultural value, or basis of an oppositional frame (Ciurel 12).

The support an organization elicits from the public at large depends on the content of its frames, especially the frame's resonance with audiences, which is determined in turn by its salience and credibility. The key to credibility is consistency (among beliefs and claims, as well as with real life actions), empirical credibility (how well the frame fits with individuals' perception of real events, NOT actual reality), and the credibility of the frame's articulators (status, position, expertise, or trustworthiness). salience consists of centrality (how key the values, beliefs, and ideas are to the target audience), 'experiential commensurability' (how completely the framings capture the everyday experience of the audience), as well as the cultural resonance of the message(Ciurel 10).

Although there is no one way of framing that is more effective in all situations than any other, research demonstrates that the way frames are utilized affects how messages are received by different groups. One such study compared the effects of antagonistically framed versus protagonistically framed messages on people in support, against, and neutral toward highly charged protest movements, finding that antagonistic framing succeeded in mobilizing people who were already more ideologically extreme, while more neutral bystanders were affected very little or even turned off by extreme rhetoric (Aslani 2001).

In cultural studies it is important to emphasize that no one theory can completely capture the state of reality, yet the concept of framing provides a useful way of evaluating the form and efficacy of a collective action.

#### Legal Barriers: Speech Restrictions in Prison

A key part of prison reform is listening to what prisoners have to say about the conditions that they live in. As increased exposure to local news programs, which are riddled with stories about crime, is associated with higher levels of punitive sentiments (Waid-Lindberg, 2011), it is important for these same people to see exactly what conditions imprisoned people live in so that imprisoned individuals are humanized, and simplistic, fear-driven punitiveness is tempered with an appreciation of the complex costs of imprisonment (Sotirovic, 2001). But the public and news organization's ability to receive the information about happenings within prisons has been severely hampered by two sets of legal action; the Prison Litigation Reform Act of 1997 (PLRA) and the 1987 Supreme Court Decision *Turner v. Safley*. These made it significantly more

difficult for inmates' concerns to be heard by people outside of prisons, with major repercussions for information availability during the National Prison Strike of 2018.

In *Turner v. Safley*, the Supreme Court severely limited the legal protections given to both outgoing messages and incoming messages, allowing prison officials near impunity in deciding what information prisoners receive and send out (Bianchi 2017, 5). This decision increased prison administrators' ability to keep prisoners from communicating with incarcerated individuals in other prisons, maintaining that such communication would "facilitate the development of informal organizations that threaten the core functions of prison administration, maintaining safety and internal security"(Bianchi 7). *Turner v Safley* also gives prison administrators authority to prevent inmates from receiving publications that they deem problematic (Bianchi 10) and limit the number of people that inmates are allowed to call (Bianchi 12). The throttling of outgoing messages means that the public rarely hears about events or conditions from within prisons.

But while the *Turner* decision restricts outgoing speech to the public, the PLRA restricts inmate's ability to address grievances through litigation. The PLRA was designed to "discourage frivolous and abusive lawsuits, and for other purposes" and asserted that prisoners must exhaust all administrative remedies before they were allowed to bring a lawsuit to court (Drapkin 2018). Senator Bob Dole who brought the act to the Senate floor used the example of a prisoner bringing a lawsuit about being provided chunky instead of smooth peanut butter. While this was a striking and convincing example, it was actually false. In reality, a prisoner had returned an unopened jar of peanut butter and hadn't been refunded for it (Umphres 2019). While



this may seem trivial to outsiders, the limited pay received by prisoners who work for wages as low as 50 cents an hour--means that a five dollar jar of peanut butter represents something of a luxury good to the prisoner.

Under the PLRA, inmates have to try to address prison officials about their problem before filing a lawsuit in court. When inmates are permitted to file a suit in court, they are forced to represent themselves, due to a persistent misreading of the PLRA by courts, according to which a lawyer's compensation for winning a case is capped at 150% of the monetary award received by the plaintiff. This means that in the case of the peanut butter jar, the lawyer's maximum compensation for taking the case would be, essentially, the cost of one-and-a-half jars of peanut butter. In a particularly dramatic example, in 1992 a death row inmate in South Carolina who was brutally beaten by three guards was awarded, due to his status on death row, a total of 10 cents in damages, and his lawyer received \$28,000 due to the 171 hours of work they put into the case. While the ludicrously low monetary reparations to the prisoner are itself worthy of consternation, if the same case was heard today, and a similarly low payment of damages was decided on by the jury, due to the 150% cap on lawyer fees, the lawyer working the case would receive a maximum payment of 15 cents (Branham 2001). This means that even in the case of grievous offenses, there is a disincentive for lawyers to take up cases due to juries reluctance to award significant monetary damages to prisoners. When inmates, as a result, represent themselves in court, decisions rarely resolve in their favor.

The Turner decision and the PLRA make it near impossible for prisoners to address grievances within the prison, makes communication with the outside world

extremely difficult, and subjects them to extreme censorship. However, the silence from within prisons is sometimes broken by individuals with contraband cell phones, a significant risk, as some prisons, such as some in South Carolina, crack down especially harshly on inmates engaging in social media, so that, shockingly, “an inmate who caused a riot, took three hostages, murdered them, stole their clothes, and then escaped could still wind up with fewer Level 1 offenses than an inmate who updated Facebook every day for two weeks”(Asher-Shapiro CJR).

The restrictions on speech imposed by the PLRA and *Turner* case posed a significant challenge for prison reform activists and the interested public during and after the prison strike of 2018.

#### The National Prison Strike of 2018

In April 2018 in Lee Correctional Facility in South Carolina, a brawl broke out between inmates—likely due to overcrowding, poor management, and frustration due to horrid conditions—resulting in the death of seven inmates, and the injuring of multiple others. During the brawl, guards, fearing for their safety, left the area, and didn’t return until seven hours later. Videos taken with contraband cell phones from within the prison showed fellow inmates bandaging each other before medical assistance arrived.

Following the brawl, and responding to conditions in their own prisons, incarcerated men and women in 17 states, including some in South Carolina, California, and Alabama stopped working and demanded attention. Their demands, in short: more humane conditions, an end to underpaid prison labor, access to rehabilitation services, voting rights, the revocation of the Prison Litigation Reform Act, and an end to the numerous racist practices that have led to an outsized proportion of the inmates in U.S.

prisons being black. This national strike was organized by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC), a socialist group that seeks to unionize prison laborers, in cooperation with Jailhouse Lawyers Speak (JLS), an anonymous group of incarcerated activists.

The strike unfolded as follows: IWOC was contacted by inmates in various prisons, including members of JLS. At the same time, JLS contacted Amani Sawari, who had written for a year for the prison abolition newsletter “I am We,” and who they asked to be their spokesperson for the campaign. These two--IWOC and Sawari on the outside and JLS on the inside-- were the access points that linked the prisoners to the public.

Because the campaign garnered coverage from mainstream news outlets, with stories appearing in the Guardian, Al Jazeera, NPR, the Washington Post, the BBC, and Mother Jones (mainly focusing on the claim that unpaid prison labor is modern day slavery), some organizers from JLS called the strike a success. But the truth is, gaining a picture of what exactly happened during and in the aftermath of the strike has proven nearly impossible. Some prison officials have denied the existence of work stoppages and protests or dubbed them “riots” or “gang-related” disturbances. At the same time, there have also been a slew of reports from within prisons claiming retribution by guards(NLG). Since media access to prisons is mostly denied due to the PLRA and the *Turner* decision, and many prisons went into lockdown during the strike affidavits obtained by lawyers representing incarcerated individuals are the sole source of information.

Given the impossibility of obtaining primary source materials--inmate's first hand testimony in their own voices, the responsibility for framing the message and conveying the reality of prison life fell on the shoulders of organizations such as IWOC and JLS who were able to publish only anonymous stories from within the prison. These two limited sources might have effectively disseminated information and reported on prison life to the outside world, but the reach of their messages was undercut by a number of factors, including ineffective frame amplification, and a lack of attempts at frame extension due to rigid ideological positions, which exacerbated the already limited reliability of social media platforms-- in this case Twitter-- to broadcast information and messages.

#### Twitter as the Public Sphere:

Twitter could be seen as a version of Habermas's conception of the public sphere. The public sphere is the realm of public discourse, entered freely and equally by all, that functions as a space outside the purview of the state, in which citizens critically discuss the political authority of the time and form something resembling a 'public opinion', through "the rationalization of power through the medium of public discussion" (Habermas 55). Typically, this refers in modern days to the ideal functioning of the press, which, acts as a representation of the public will (Habermas 37). However, in early capitalist times, the discourse of the public sphere took place within public spaces where people would enter into discussions as individuals and deliberate based on the merits of one's ideas. Twitter, as a space of communication that is open to everyone

with an internet connection, could be seen as functioning politically in a similar way to the earlier conception of the public sphere.

Some have argued that Twitter functions more as a collection of ‘personal publics’ than a unified public sphere. “Personal” because what one sees is determined by who they decide to follow, and “public” because one is still putting their ideas and opinions into a space that could theoretically be accessed by anyone with an account. While in the public sphere a person entering into the discussion hears all the points of views put forth and can’t help hear opinions they disagree with, on Twitter one decides who they hear from. Although the public stock of ideas is still discussed, a user only hears the opinions of those they have already followed based on similarities in interests, point of view, or various other components (Matheson 2017). Some have suggested this contributes to a sort of ‘Balkanization’ of opinions, where unless a user seeks out opposition views, they hear only views that echo their own and become more and more entrenched in their opinions. Still, the political potential of social media applications should not be understated; as demonstrated with mass movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter, both of which spread rapidly, primarily across social networks.

Although the disparate personal publics should not be characterized as forming one unified social whole, they also should not be conceptualized as being totally distinct. Users do not separate themselves into groups with clear boundaries, meaning that networks of connection overlap, diffusing popular messages over a large range. Although users with a high number of followers are more likely to set off these “cascades” of retweets that lead to a post “going viral”, one’s number of followers is a weak determinant of the size of these cascades (Bastos 2013).

Additionally, hashtags allow for the aggregation of opinions around a single topic that, if it reaches a certain critical mass, can pass into the “trending” section of Twitter, and enter into the awareness of users with no connections to the original posters. Once the hashtag reaches this level, it can spread at a rapid rate and reach a much broader swathe of the population of users. For researchers, hashtags provide a way of getting a crude read on what is happening in the public sphere of Twitter. However, Twitter’s guidelines make it very difficult to collect all of the tweets from a certain period of time in order to survey all of the sentiment expressed.

Twitter can also be a way for governments to get a read on the sentiment of the public. Government officials are able to speak directly to the public via Twitter, and although it is questionable how much they listen to the replies (Hancer 2017), Twitter provides a forum through which politicians, or whomever runs their account, have a direct line of communication with the public.

Given the possibility of a message going viral, Twitter has incredible potential for social activists seeking to spread a particularly powerful message, and this potential is there even for users with a fairly small group of followers. Additionally, hashtags allow for the aggregation of information surrounding a particular issue, which can then achieve ‘trending’ status, and reach a wider portion of the population. However, the collection of users into personal publics means that there are no guarantees. Even a message with many favorites or retweets may not have been distributed to a significant portion of the population, but rather been circulated heavily by a group of committed users.

The information vacuum surrounding prisons is virtually impenetrable. Due to free speech restrictions, incarcerated individuals are excluded from the public sphere and must risk punishment by using contraband cell phones. Media access to prisons is limited. Attorneys have limited incentives. While popular movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter relied on first-hand accounts from people who had experienced sexual violence and racism, first-hand experience from prisoners is limited to attorney affidavits and a few activists on Twitter with a committed following.

Given the unreliability of Twitter as a broadcast medium, a great deal of importance falls on frame extension, the adaptation of a frame to be more appealing to people who aren't in direct opposition to the aims of the activist organization. This effort was significantly underutilized by activists in the case of the 2018 National Prison Strike.

#### Framing on social media: Trends in JLS and IWOC activity

Jailhouse Lawyers Speak and the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee both had similar framing techniques, establishing the need to act through prognostic framing with the distribution of inmate's list of demands, although their efforts were harmed by not focusing on any one of the demands in detail. They also clearly had a strategy of frame amplification, focusing primarily on the assertion that today's prisons are a new form of slavery. Both also took advantage of the nature of Twitter as a collection of dedicated personal publics, organizing effective 'phone zaps' in support of particular prison activists when they received reports of repression in response to the strike.

Both accounts' credibility as people speaking from within prisons was well established, as multiple tweets made reference to the fact that they were working from

within prisons. However, this very credibility could turn into a drawback when inmates' legitimacy was challenged by those sympathetic to the victims of their crimes, arousing punitive sentiments which deprive them of the ability to take the moral high ground. This was expressed by one user in response to an IWOC call to action: "Workers earn an honest pay cheque - you're criminals who are in jail for punishment. If you can't do the time don't do the crime!" This exemplifies a primary messaging failure of the strike: The accounts didn't make consistent in depth arguments about the numerous injustices were taking place. Instead, they mostly relied on users having a similar understanding that the prison system was unjust.

This effect could have been mitigated somewhat through a combination of frame extension and experiential commensurability- the ability of a frame to capture the everyday experience of the subject they are trying to convince- which was nonexistent for most of the people that would need to be convinced of the validity of the concerns of the prison activists, as they had not been to prison themselves. These were used only once during the strike, when JLS linked to an article in the online publication Shadowproof which contained interviews with three inmates from Lee Correctional institute, and addressed a multitude of issues, from cell phones in prisons to the reasons that gangs are oftentimes necessary in prisons, "If an incident goes on, there's no officers there to protect anybody. That's another thing about the gangs. Nowadays, you don't know, these young brothers might need protection. They can't look at the officers and say these officers are going to protect me and keep me safe. It ain't no such thing as that." This provides a more complex view of prison gangs than one that is possible without the input of inmates. Additionally, they make numerous arguments



about the origins of violence within prisons, arguing that the main drivers of violence in prisons is a combination of poor management, overcrowding, having nothing to do, and a sense of hopelessness that sets in due to extremely long sentences and a lack of job training and educational opportunities. The article was posted along with the message “A little over one week after the deadliest incidence of recorded violence of prison violence in the United States a quarter century, a coalition of prisoners, including representatives from @JailLawSpeak , announced a national #prisonstrike. #August21”. This makes no reference to the crucial information contained within, only relying on user’s willingness to read a lengthy article, which, judging by the four favorites and two retweets, not many people did. This represents an inadequate job of diagnostic framing. Although the solutions to the problem were given in the form of the list of demands, readily shareable, powerful personal testimonials that detailed the concerns of inmates were only presented once throughout the entirety of the four month campaign. As stated earlier, consistent messaging by an account makes a “cascade” of retweets more likely, yet the claims made by the interviewees were never mentioned again by either JLS or IWOC during the rest of the strike.

Yet perhaps the greatest failure on the part of activists was in frame bridging. One post from JLS captures the emotional toll of being an incarcerated activist: “While I’m typing here I was just alerted from our comrades in NY that they have had 3 major stabbings of key people (while pigs watched) that has the prison system tense. I’m done for the day”. In this context, it is difficult to suggest more engagement on the part of incarcerated activists such as those from JLS. Yet this is where activists such as Amina Sawari could be linked to.

Sawari served as the spokesperson for JLS in many of their media appearances. But just as important were here informative posts-- on Twitter as well as her blog-- throughout the strike on issues such as police reform, prison labor as modern-day slavery, the PLRA, alternatives to incarceration, racism, and gang enhancement laws. The failure of JLS and IWOC to link to her tweets even once during the entire strike, prevented their supporters from sharing readable and detailed arguments, exactly the kind of messages that might have persuaded more people.

### Conclusion

While organizing the largest national prison strike in the history of the U.S. was a huge accomplishment, there are still things that could be improved upon to gain broader public support and increase awareness of injustices in the prison system. While convincing a punitive public of the necessity of prison reform will never be easy, the restrictions of the PLRA as well as the consistent misinterpretation of the *Turner v Safley* decision mean that the public is unable to obtain first-hand accounts of inhumane conditions, as well as potential barriers in the way of rehabilitation. Breaking this divide between prisoner and public, inmate-run Twitter accounts have the potential to bring the voices of prisoners into the virtual public sphere. Yet the very medium that allows them this participation also limits their reach.

The work done by JLS and IWOC on Twitter took advantage of the organization of Twitter into personal publics, mobilizing their active base in effective organized support of prisoners being punished due to their role in the strike. However, this same feature may limit them from gaining widespread viewership, as the content they produce

has a very radical message that requires a great deal of prior knowledge in order to be understood or taken seriously. While these messages sometimes gained a significant number of retweets and favorites, sometimes five hundred or more, they relied mostly on assertions rather than explanations, and then didn't link to accounts that provided this further information. This inadequate frame bridging and diagnostic framing likely hampered their ability to reach and convince a wider range of people.

Despite the imperfections of their messaging, it is still of vital importance to engage with the content produced by inmates. While calls of support and endorsements from prominent figures such as Oprah, Common, and J. Cole (whose Tweets were the most favorited of any in the campaign) as well as from the general public are important to increase awareness of the existence of the voices of the incarcerated, supplementing calls of support with their actual voices is now possible.

Because of the risks that posting on social media entails for incarcerated activists, it may be unrealistic to expect them to fully craft a collective action frame. But their voices are there, it is now up to people on the outside to listen, learn, and amplify them, in order to make our carceral system more just.

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